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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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India touts expertise in 'medical tourism'

By Andy Hoffman
From Thursday's Globe and Mail

Many patients seek to avoid long wait times; others want cutting edge treatments not available at home

In the market for a new knee, hip resurfacing or maybe a gastric bypass? India wants your business.

Boasting a highly skilled work force of medical practitioners and top notch private health care facilities, India is actively vying for a bigger share of the estimated \$60-billion (U.S.) spent by Canadians and others on medical procedures in foreign countries each year.

Backed by India's government, private health care companies and firms that specialize in "medical tourism" trips, a conference promoting India as a prime health care destination is being staged in Toronto next month. The three-day event, held at Toronto's Metro Convention Centre, will be free to the public, in hopes of attracting more Canadian medical tourism dollars to India.

"Medical tourism in India is one of the best options available to people across the globe. Millions come every year to get treated," Preeti Saran, India's consul general to Toronto, told reporters yesterday.

Armed with well-trained doctors and modern medical facilities financed by the private sector, India is fighting for a larger slice of the booming global medical tourism industry, which is expected to grow to \$100-billion by 2010, according to a recent report by consulting firm Deloitte. India is competing with more than 35 countries including Mexico, Cuba, Thailand and Singapore that are promoting their own medical systems to foreigners.

India claims it can offer developed world treatment at developing world prices. Deloitte estimates that medical procedures in India cost just 20 per cent of what the same operation would cost in the United States. "It's getting that same treatment at a fraction of the cost," Ms. Saran said.

Yet cost is just one of the factors driving the growing medical tourism sector.

The bulk of the patients are seeking out the best care available at any cost. Others, including many Canadians, are looking to avoid long wait times. Many more are seeking cutting edge treatments not available at home.

While most medical procedures are covered by Canada's health care system, patients frustrated with long wait times or those seeking alternative treatments are increasingly travelling abroad for medical care.

Canadians account for about 7 per cent of the global medical tourism market, according to a recent study by McKinsey & Co. The bulk of Canadian's medical tourism travel is to the U.S.

Yasmeen Sayeed, president and chief executive officer of Surgical Tourism Canada Inc., which facilitates trips to India and other medical tourism destinations, said her business has grown from just a few clients in 2005 to more than 100 clients a year. With offices in Vancouver, Toronto and Seattle, the company sends 95 per cent of its customers to India for major surgeries. "We do a lot of hips, knees, cardiac, bariatric and most of all, spines," Ms. Sayeed said in an interview.

While many clients are hoping to avoid long waiting times, some, including spinal or gastric-bypass (bariatric) surgery patients head to India for operations that are not widely available in Canada and are much cheaper than in the U.S.

For example, a hip resurfacing operation, that would cost between \$35,000 and \$40,000 in the U.S. costs just \$14,000 (Canadian) in India, including air fare, taxes, and a post-op stay at a five-star beach resort.

Provincial health care systems such as OHIP in Ontario generally don't cover the costs of medical tourism although some patients have appealed and won the cost of treatment overseas. Ms. Sayeed said the provinces are starting to cover more and more treatments outside of Canada.

"There have been several precedents of people legally getting their rights but now OHIP is also very quietly paying for some of the cases," Ms. Sayeed said.

Officials from Ontario's Ministry of Health did not respond to requests for comment.

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